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Sur le Fil

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Haley Hoekstra

LMU Dance Department - Senior Thesis

Sur le Fil

Section 1

For my senior thesis, I choreographed a solo titled “Sur le Fil” that I performed in the Student Spring Dance Concert. I always had intentions to do a solo my senior year, but I did not declare it as my thesis until later. Originally, I was planning on doing a thesis about audience participation in the dance world. I wanted to do this because I had been having experiences in the past years of realizing that not many people fully understand the art of dance. I also noticed that there were not many people attending concert dance shows. I realized that if I wanted to have a career in dance, then I needed an audience. So, I started researching and discussing this topic. I started to lose interest in my audience participation project because I felt like there was not enough I could do with it, and I had already had many conversations with people in the dance world regarding this idea. As senior year went on, I switched my thesis to creating a solo instead of the audience participation project. By this point, I was already deep in the process of my solo and felt that declaring it as my thesis would allow me to spend more mental and physical energy on it. This choice allowed me to even further invest myself in the solo. I was and still am extremely passionate about this solo process and knew it was something I wanted to take full ownership of.

One of my goals as a senior was to perform and choreograph a solo for the Student Spring Dance Concert. Many experiences led me to have this strong desire. My history at LMU not only explains why I wanted to do a solo but also reveals why I would end up having improvisational elements in it. Watching others perform in the concert, being exposed to choreography for the first time, spending hours in the studio, dance intensives, and other performative experiences are some reasons that I was guided to this decision. First, I became

interested in creating a solo after watching many other people perform solos at the Strub Theatre. I observed people throughout their process and watched them on stage and saw myself being in their shoes in the future. Another experience that is important to discuss is my experience with being exposed to choreographing for the first time my freshmen year.

Prior to my time at LMU, I had never considered choreographing. I had always performed other people's works and I did not see myself as a choreographer. Once I arrived at LMU and was required to take choreographic classes, I started to reconsider that belief about myself. The choreography classes were a challenge for me because it was something I had not been exposed to. Reverting to improvisation instead of structure was something I did often when given assignments in these classes. However, I slowly started experimenting in choreography classes and even choreographed a collaborative duet my sophomore year. Although I enjoyed this process, coming up with set movements that I felt good about was difficult. I was still in a place where I felt more comfortable having choreography taught to me or produced on me. This informed me that my main passion was performing.

An additional experience that revealed this to me was when I choreographed a group piece for Impulse my junior year. Choreographing my first group piece for LMU was a learning opportunity. Throughout the process, I realized that I needed more time to create the piece, and I needed to exhibit patience with people in the dance. I craved more time for exploration and experimentation throughout the process. During the process of teaching the choreography to my friends, I saw that my style was very specific to my quality of movement, my body, and my abilities. It was hard to transpose my movement onto other people. When it came time to watch the final performance at Impulse, I had a strong desire to be on the stage as opposed to in the

audience playing the role of choreographer. Due to these realizations, I decided that it was not the best choice to choreograph a piece involving my peers. This gave me the urge to share my choreography but on my own body. I wanted to create the piece but also be the piece. This was an internal struggle that called me to reflect on my desires as an artist. The experience further encouraged me to come back the following semester and create a solo for myself.

Throughout my time at LMU, more so during my junior and senior year, I spent countless hours by myself in the studio. I would improvise for hours, to any song, at any time of day. I never had a reason for doing this other than the fact that I loved to move and HAD to dance. It became one of my favorite things to do. Sometimes, it would be late on a Friday or Saturday night. Other times, I would spend time improvising after an inspiring jazz class. If I was happy, I would go to dance; if I was frustrated, I would go to dance; if I was lonely, I would go to dance. If I heard a new song I liked, tried a new style of dance, or watched a professional dance show, I would go to the studios. Simply put, time alone in the studios was and continues to be a safe space for me. It became a consistent practice of mine, unconsciously. Reflecting back now, I realize how much time I have spent improvising in the studios by myself, so it only makes complete sense why I ended up creating a solo that was structured improvisation as opposed to set choreography. I did not spend all that time in the studios choreographing rather I was just exploring movement in the moment. I had the chance to continue this movement exploration further during summer intensives.

This last summer had a large impact on me and made my desire to share a solo with the community at LMU even greater. I trained in San Francisco at Alonzo King Lines Ballet for a month and in Chicago at Hubbard Street for a month. These experiences gave me a new fire and

confidence. Many realizations and breakthroughs happened that summer. I was stronger than ever. My understanding of dance in a technical, emotional, intellectual, and philosophical way had deepened. I had been learning so much about what my style was and who I was as an artist. A sense of artistry and commitment elevated. I saw this in myself and I wanted others to see it too. This was a big moment because dance used to be something that was special and secretive to me. I did not want people to watch; I did not want others to understand. As I matured, I wanted to start sharing this gift. This switch in perspective became even more evident after training in different cities. It was no longer about me but the audience that I was hopefully going to impact. I knew that I wanted to affect an audience through performance and not just choreographing, again I was further steered toward this thesis.

I arrived back at LMU after the intensives ready to work. For the fall faculty show, I had the honor of being in Sidra Bell's piece directed by Lillian. This was a moment at LMU that further encouraged me to do this solo. Early in the process, Lillian had asked the cast to create a solo using five phrases from the piece as inspiration along with other guidelines. I ended up spending hours on this. I loved working on something by myself and having the freedom I had. It allowed me to make choices that best fit me as an artist. If it was not working the way I wanted, I could change the steps in the moment. I could do the solo different every time and know one would know. The process enthralled me. I felt great about this. I went to rehearsal when we were auditioning for the solo part, and I was actually excited to share. I ended up only getting to be the understudy for the solo part with a longer section of an improvisational solo in the middle of the dance. Lillian had made a comment during show week that was something about how my performance quality was not as captivating during the choreographic parts of the piece, but

during my improvisational moments and my solo section, she could not take her eyes off of me. This comment resonated with me. This experience was another part of my journey that reaffirmed I wanted to create a solo and that I love improvising on stage.

Shortly after this experience, I began rehearsals for my solo. All of the experiences leading up to the beginning of this piece's journey filled me with motivation and excitement. When I started the solo, I knew that my patience, energy, and effort toward my vision would be limitless. This solo is a culmination of my entire life as an artist, specifically my time at LMU. I wanted to leave LMU with a part of me. Going into the creation of the solo, I knew I wanted to create something that I loved. I entered with the mantra, "All good things take time." The solo was immediately something I invested in. I hoped that I would learn more about my process as an artist. I was curious how I would best curate choreography. I wanted to try new and different tools when choreographing. Would the music be my inspiration the entire time? Would I think of specific words? Was I mainly researching movement? How would my technique influence my style? What really is my style? What do I do in times of exhaustion and frustration? How would I handle the adjudication process? How would I handle feedback and mentorship? All these questions are what I wanted to learn. I also wanted to learn about myself. I wanted to take advantage of an amazing opportunity to create and perform with studio space and a handful of talented mentors. I was much more concerned with the process rather than the outcome. The project was about what I had discovered as a dance artist during my time at LMU.

When I entered the process, I knew it would be challenging. I had never done anything like this before. However, I knew the challenges were going to make me grow and that is partially why I did it. One challenge that I immediately identified at the generation of the solo

was that I was going to have to hold myself accountable. I scheduled weekly studio space and told myself that I had to treat it like any other rehearsal. I had to show up on time and stay the whole time. Self-motivation and drive was something I had to embrace rather than see as a challenge. I asked a lot of myself. Also, I did not have a lot of choreographic experience in hopes of putting the piece on stage as opposed to classroom work. I had always struggled with setting choreography. This challenge will be brought up later in the paper. These are only the few challenges that I faced at the beginning of the process. However, there were more that surfaced as the process went on which will also be discussed later.

Section 2

Beginnings of creative processes can be the most difficult part. Once I knew I wanted to do a solo and why I wanted to do a solo, I had a lot of decisions to make. I had to start somewhere. One of the first decisions I made was that I wanted to do a piece to piano music. The original plan was that my dear friend, Anna, would play the piano for me. What inspired this was the collaborative piece I did with the music department last spring. I enjoyed the intersection of live dance and live music. Also, I had always been extremely connected to piano music. Something about the piano made me connect with my soul and really resonate with who I am. Anna and I had discussed this collaboration, and we set up a time for us to pick a song. She had played me a couple of songs from one of her favorite soundtracks. I remember so clearly looking at the sheet music titled “Sur le Fil” and had a gut feeling this would be the song. Anna played the song for me, and I had goosebumps and tears in my eyes. I fell in love with this piece of music. The first note of the music haunted me in a way that I knew I needed more. I thought the

dynamics and changes of tempo and intensity reflected my life: not consistent and not always lovely. I listened and listened to this song before I ever started moving to it.

The next step was to get in the studios and start creating movement. I started rehearsals by playing other songs that made me want to move. Whatever song was stuck in my head, I would play. I improvised for hours. I discovered that when I improvise for a long period of time, my body starts repeating certain movements and gestures without my mind consciously knowing that I am doing it. Certain movements feel right in my body and my muscle memory goes back to that good feeling. Suddenly, specific movements became part of my vocabulary. I found gestures that stood out to me.

These gestures became significant to the process. One gesture that was really important to my first version of this piece was my hand on my forehead. This is because this is where our prefrontal cortex and frontal lobe are located. From studying psychology, I know that these two areas are in charge of decision making and judgement. This is relevant because self-judgement is something I have struggled with my entire life. This self-judgement happens inside the classroom and in the real world. I started doing this weird thing during ballet where I would put my forehead on my hand and wipe my hand across. This resembled physically removing the judgements out of my head. Every time I did this, I would feel better and end up doing four pirouettes instead of two hoppy ones. I integrated this gesture into my piece because it represented the judgement I was having during the first part of my process. I immediately struggled with not thinking I was capable of making a solo work. Instead of shying away from these thoughts, I faced them head on. This gesture allowed me to fully express what I was feeling.

My focus/trajectory became an intentional addition to the first version of the piece. In rehearsals, I was very focused on the two front corners of the room where the “EXIT” sign is located. This was a habit I had formed over the years, so I decided to integrate it in my first version of my solo. I joke and say that I may be looking at the “EXIT” signs because I really want to leave. This idea of wanting to leave and hide was important in my process. Again, I embraced this feeling rather than running from it, and I used this trajectory to express my timidity.

One more idea I played with was the idea of repetition. This summer, a choreographer I worked with closely would constantly do one move over and over again until he felt like it was what he wanted it to be. I was absolutely captivated by this. The process of him being so incredibly frustrated with a move and his strong desire to find the best way to do it was so interesting and relatable. It was not that the move was interesting; rather, it was the different ways he would do it and the utter frustration and drive behind it. I felt similar. When embodying this myself, I felt frustrated when trying to find the “best” way to do a certain move. Playing with different dynamics, speeds, and qualities within a movement excited me and represented the frustration that I was feeling when trying to find the most effective way to speak to an audience. This concept further developed as the process went on.

The idea of reworking movements became a theme early on. I started to question why certain technical elements were so important to me. I began to be interested in making ballet “ugly.” I started working with the idea of deconstruction without knowing it. The idea of deconstructing inspired me to create moments where I was just seen as a human and not as a dancer. How could I break down the foundations that have been engraved in me after years of

training and just embrace that I am a regular person, too? These ideas and gestures arose after I spent many hours in the studios. It is interesting to reflect on how my body produces certain concepts before I understand what is happening emotionally and mentally.

After several rehearsals, it was time for the first adjudication. I went into the first adjudication with these ideas in mind but not a whole lot of structure. By no means did I have a complete piece. If someone were to ask me if I had the whole five minutes of the solo created I would have said no, but I am going to do all of it. There was nothing set, but I knew intuitively that it was in my body and I knew exactly what I wanted to share and embody. My intentions were clear and I trusted my body enough to showcase that.

In my journal the night before adjudication I wrote, “I’m not sure what it is about (the piece), I want to be proud of something and be like WOW I made that and feel great about it because I always feel frustrated. Frustration is a perfect thing to dance for when the thing you love the most is what frustrates you the most. It is kind of a dark feeling. You’re never satisfied, but you’re addicted and in love. I want to share what I’m in love with. This solo might be a lot like bringing your boyfriend to your parents for the first time. It’s scary, but you’ve been waiting for it and you almost care what they think, but you know how you feel and that’s mainly what matters... you keep trying and trying but you may give up, but you don’t want to. You always run back to the thing you love the most, right? I think we all do that. It’s about accepting the frustration because it’s worth the joy. A dance about what dance means to me.”

The handout that I was asked to fill out and give to the full-time staff further expresses where I was at in the process. I wrote, “This piece is an opportunity for me to learn more about what my process as a choreographer and style as a mover is like. I want to take my last chance of

performing at LMU to continue learning from my mentors and about myself and give to the community. This piece is still in process and is not about something specific, yet. Movement exploration has been my focus thus far. I am interested in what it is like to be in ‘full dancer mode’ and then switching to ‘human mode’ as well as having improvisational elements. I’m also working with the idea of how dance is frustrating, but what cures the frustration is dancing more. Accepting the frustration because it is worth the joy. The piece is gloomy, dynamic, and contemplative. I have lighting ideas in my mind, but I am sure they will develop further.”

So, I went into adjudication and did my solo in front of people for the first time. I was committed, intentional, and honest during the whole five minutes of the piece. I finished my solo and a rush of joy took over. I can almost confidently say that (before the actual performances) I had never experienced anything like this feeling. Prior to this night, I had always felt horrible after performances because I would not think I did a good enough job. This feeling was so extreme, and in the past, I did not want to see people after any performances because their feedback and surface level “good jobs” always set my self-judgement on fire. Not this time! After adjudication, I felt happy and powerful. The fact that I was celebrating the dance I just performed as opposed to self-doubting myself was a big moment for me. And that’s why I knew I was doing something right.

Happily, I found out the next day that I made it to the next round. This meant that I would continue my process! I received the video from adjudication and watched closely so I could decipher what my next steps in the process would be. I was pleased with some parts of the solo. I knew I loved the way it felt, but I did not love the way all of it looked. I loosely hung on to the movements that felt right and held on tightly to the honesty and freedom. The next step was to

continue rehearsing and honoring these intentions along with curiosity and exploration. Feedback and discussion would also be crucial in improvement and development.

I received feedback from all of the faculty plus some other mentors which was really helpful for me. I knew what I valued because I could decipher between the positive feedback that I heard while disagreeing respectfully with other feedback. I knew I could not apply all the feedback, so I ran with the ideas that resonated with me the most. The motivational feedback of “Keep doing what you are doing” which I mainly received from Damon, Roz, Teresa, and Kristen really meant the world to me. It allowed me to trust myself and push further. The individual feedback is important to mention. Roz gave me feedback that encouraged me to take all of the ideas I had and further explore them. How extreme could I get?

In my meeting with Kristen, she helped me see that there may be a sense of ABA structure. The idea of deconstruction was also emphasized. She said that it felt like I was saying, “This is the form and this is what is inside of it.” We discussed how this solo was more about sharing the surface first and then revealing the content underneath. We talked about showing the dancer and not just the dance. This arose because originally I wanted to have a black-out while I walked to a different part of the stage during silence. Kristen told me that showing the walking revealed a very human side as opposed to shying away from that by having the stage go to black. She encouraged me to let the audience experience that human moment. The idea of deconstruction and fragmentation was talked about and then further explored. Kristen was also the first person to talk to me about the option of improvisation. At this point, I was not sure if I was going to stick to improvising or not. Knowing that I had the option and support was special.

Although this was a brief run-down of some of the feedback I received from Kristen, it covers some of the main ideas I continued to work with.

Teresa's feedback helped me understand how the solo was perceived. She said it was a psychological piece and felt like I was sharing something. We discussed the loneliness of being on stage. She also shared with me that a soloist can have 100 different versions of one solo. This made me realize that this solo may be a lifelong work. It also influenced my decision to add improvisational elements, so each night the piece could be new. I may not have 100 different versions at LMU, but I could have eight. Teresa and I talked about how I was performing an idea/feeling and the movements are an expression of that. The use of imagery as opposed to not doing already named moves was also discussed. These were all things that made sense to me and things I wanted to embrace.

Alexx Shilling was another close mentor. She and I had gotten close because of my regular pilates visits. I started to share my solo with her. Her feedback and suggestions were beneficial. She said she felt like a sense of time was disrupted. She saw a sense of playing with power and vulnerability. She gave me an exercise to do. I was asked to make a list of everything perfect and then find the opposite word for it. Alexx also encouraged me to think of having the memory of the hand on my forehead as opposed to keeping it there (in reference to the gesture discussed above). When I took this idea to the studio, I decided the hand on the forehead was no longer necessary. She also encouraged me to try the dance in a circle or only in one part of the room (in reference to the trajectory discussed above). This was something I played with throughout the process. I was encouraged by her to look at Doris Humphrey and Tricia Brown.

Scott also gave me the suggestion to look into Doris Humphrey, Twyla Tharp, Martha Graham, Isadora Duncan, and others. I deeply considered and explored all of this feedback.

Coincidentally, not too long after my meetings with Alexx and Scott, the section for our jazz class was on some of the modern pioneers. I knew about them, but I did not understand their depths. This encouraged me to study them deeply. My main focuses were the people suggested including, Doris, Twyla, Martha, and Isadora. I realized how much I relate to them. What these modern influencers went through a hundred years ago, I am currently going through. I found a clear relationship between myself and them. Their self-discovery through dance and their relationship with ballet was all things I was working through. Although I am not going to write about the in-depth research, I will share some of my favorite quotes that I have seen in several places throughout my life. These quotes eloquently speak about the discoveries and struggles I was noticing in my process.

“Do I watch dancers as people? Yes, absolutely. Do I watch really good dancers for specifically who they are? Absolutely, because how they move best and how they look best is going to be most familiar to them, and not necessarily to me.” -Twyla Tharp

“I wish my dance reflects some of my personal experiences in relationship to the external world, that it is based on reality illuminated by imagination, that it is organic more than synthetic, that it causes an evident reaction in my audience and that it contributes to the drama of life.” -Doris Humphrey

“You must know as a dancer that every move you make reveals you even though your natural tendencies may be thwarted or changed by training. What you really are remains an easily read story even to the layman.” - Doris Humphrey

“I did not want to be a tree, a flower or a wave. In a dancer's body, we as audience must see ourselves, not the imitated behavior of everyday actions, not the phenomenon of nature, not exotic creatures from another planet, but something of the miracle that is a human being.” - Martha Graham

It has taken me years of struggle, hard work and research to learn to make one simple gesture, and I know enough about the art of writing to realize that it would take as many years of concentrated effort to write one simple, beautiful sentence.” -Isadora Duncan

Following the first round of adjudication, I continued to rehearse at least once a week for two hours. I would typically start by putting on all of my favorite music for that day and improvise and try on certain moves for an hour. I loved doing this. Sometimes, I would video tape myself to see what it looked like for fun. Doing this taught me how to be quick to discover new movements and problem solve. I found ways that felt good to move and then pushed the limits. I noticed my tendencies and questioned them, but I also embraced them. Habits can be viewed as bad, but in this process, I felt like the movements that I kept returning to meant something special. This practice that I have implemented in my life has allowed me to grow. It is also the reason that I am so extremely comfortable with improvising.

After I finished doing this practice during rehearsals, I would put on “Sur le Fil” and improvise to the music over and over again. Part of my practice was that if I felt like I was not being honest or present while I was dancing I would start over. I would not allow myself to do the dance without intention. I improvised to it a lot but also had certain sections that I kept. Even then, I would challenge myself to get rid of the sections I liked to see if there was a more honest, different way of moving. This was extremely frustrating. For a while, I felt like I needed to come up with choreography. I could not understand why I could not just decide on a certain sequences of moves. When I would set something, I did not love it as much. I also had not fully accepted that improvising was the “right choice.” It felt right physically, but mentally, I had roadblocks with this. How am I going to improvise on stage? What if I blank? Will I be specific enough with improvising? The frustration fueled me. The doubt fueled me. Every time I wanted to give up, I would do it again. In these moments of pushing past the frustration, I would often discover something wonderful. Rehearsals happened for many weeks. Sometimes, I would also go to the studio and improvise or choreograph without calling it my solo rehearsal. These times still contributed to my piece.

The rehearsal structure was generally consistent throughout the semester. I often journaled after or during which resurfaced emotions. During one rehearsal, I wrote in my journal, “I have always watched dancers who are really talented and thought “wow!” They are so beautiful and to me they are automatically a beautiful human too. I don’t always remember that they probably don’t act the way they dance all the time. But we never let the audience see that. I want to show them that. I am not just a pretty dancer, pretty girl. I am dynamic, deep, complex,

want to be understood but am often not. We don't always get it right. Ya know? Why do we act like it? This is my body and this is what I can do."

Another rehearsal I wrote, "I think I just learned to love myself. One of the best moments I have had with myself. I honored that when I do my solo I NEED to be honest with myself. That is my only requirement. If I am honest everyone will see. I am not here to lie or hide. So what happened is that I realized each time anyone is on stage you really get to see how open you are willing to be. If I stand still the only thing I am letting the audience do is look at me. That may be observing or judging. But for me, that is brave. That is bold. Embracing the unknown but trusting myself enough to know it will be great. Anyways, I looked in the mirror for the last thirty seconds of the piece because I know this piece is kind of a reflection/mirror of others so I thought I would try to experience that for myself. After so long I literally thought there was two of me and I was almost getting scared, I had to flinch and look away because I was standing so still. I was totally scared of myself. But then I started laughing and smiling at myself. I know that the only thing scaring me is myself. The unconditional love I want to give for other people I am first going to give to myself. 'Here it is!' This moment is so funny to me. It was so weird and bizarre. I have never experienced that before. I seriously saw myself get scared of myself and it made me laugh. Once I was able to laugh at myself I thought wow, I am not so bad! If I am not so afraid of judging myself and I view myself with love, what others think is not going to be as important. I want others to look at my solo and see the vulnerability and acceptance and think, 'I want to live like that.' I wanted to share this solo so that others would share with me."

During the week before adjudication, I spent hours in the studio one night. I made some decisions with my piece that allowed me to have some set choreography but many moments of

freedom. I knew what I was saying and I felt okay about what I had created. The next week I found out that I sprained my neck. Of course, this was not good news. However, the timing worked out. I spent the week before working so hard that I knew I could go into adjudication and show what I had with confidence even if it was not full out because of my injury.

The day before adjudication I wrote in my journal, “Tomorrow is adjudication. I am in a lot of pain and of course that is frustrating. There is a lot of pain in the world and it is okay that I feel some. I am not surprised it is the day before adjudication at all and I am here. But what I learned from last time (last adjudication) is that I can trust myself. I am who I am and I am starting to love myself as a mover because I think I can be honest and show myself and that is cool. I am not as frustrated or nervous or scared about tomorrow. I actually feel okay. I am still in my process, there are two months until the show. I just do not feel good right now because of my neck and back. I need to take care of myself.”

This was a challenging time for me. As a dancer, it is normal to always be in pain. It is the time before something important that it becomes more emotional. I did end up proving to myself that I can trust myself as I said before. I did what I could. After adjudication on Thursday, I wrote, “Dancing is home. Can I live in that forever? I was so honest. The only moment I felt like I had to do something was once. It was so flow. I love it and I want more.” The next day I wrote: “I made it in :)”

Making it into the student concert was a goal of mine. When I found out I made it in, I was ecstatic. For the sake of my improvisational research that I finally committed to, I wanted the chance to perform the solo all four nights. On top of that, I would have at least three tech runs. I wanted as many opportunities to explore improvising on stage as possible.

So, I continued to rigorously work on my solo. The idea of ballet versus improvisation became a focus at my next rehearsal and remained. I saw how the two were opposites. Ballet was perfect, structured, beautiful, presentational. Improvisation was imperfect, broken-down, ugly, free. I started to view the world through this lens. I knew that ballet was so incredibly ingrained in who I was as a person and mover, but I finally admitted to myself that it does not always feel the best. My self-critic thrives in ballet class. Improvisation was something that felt at home and was not always beautiful. I started seeing this come up everywhere in life.

Shortly after I found out I would be in the student concert, I went to Panama. When I was there I found inspiration everywhere. My love for dance grew. It became more about the other people and less about me. The architecture, freedom, love, and compassion I felt there were all things that influenced me and therefore my solo. One of the days in Panama we went to visit the old ruins. I was in awe of the beauty of the destruction. I talked to a friend about how rich seeing the destruction of something so valuable was. The ruins represented the improvisational, sensational movement I had been exploring in my solo. The ruins were not about the form but about the history and what it has been through. The city was just beyond the ruins. The buildings were developed, aesthetically pretty, and constructed well, unlike the ruins. Seeing this contrast allowed me to further understand movement. In my notes I wrote, “Can you imagine building all of this, just to burn it down yourself, consciously?” The Panamanians intentionally burned down this area when people were coming to invade their space. The choice of deconstruction surprised me. I also wrote: “The buildings of old times represent breaking down and it would not be as beautiful but it is so historical and there is so much behind it. In juxtaposition, there is the skyscrapers right behind the ruins resembling what we call ‘ballet,’ put together, organized,

structured perfectly, not falling down, physically appealing. Or even the stairs that were so perfectly formed now (for the sake of tourism), it was hard walking up them but I got to the top of the deconstructed building and said ‘i’m free.’” I also wrote, “Protecting yourself from something (materials, physical) to prosper something valuable.” After spending time in the ruins, I decided I might as well take advantage of the space and inspiration and dance! I improvised by the ruins. Then, I found an open space right in the middle and I did my solo to the music. I tried to take in everything around me. This experience was special. I considered it a performance, and I took all of the valuable information with me when I left. The deeper understanding that I gained from viewing the ruins and the city and comparing it to ballet and improvisation fueled me. Because I love to perform and experiment, getting to do this solo in another country influenced me positively.

When I got back from Panama, I continued to rehearse. I remember the Wednesday after I felt overwhelmed and stressed about doing the solo. It became real to me. I was actually going to have to get on stage and have an audience. I went to Damon’s office that morning, and he happily announced that I was his mentor. I am still so thankful for this conversation. The timing of it could not have been better. He was telling me about how brave it was that I was improvising and that everything I was doing was great. He encouraged me and reminded me how great this experience will be. I was humbled and felt much better about sharing with people. This conversation stuck with me for the rest of the process. Even though there were still times when I had complete doubt and fear, I came back to his words and guidance. What I was doing was brave and interesting. It was what I loved and needed to do, and I had an amazing support system.

On the contrary, after this realization, I had a challenging night of rehearsal. I was exhausted and anxious about sharing, and although I was trying to have a good mindset, I could not overcome the anxieties that night. Pushing through this night and embracing that was part of what made the solo come to life.

One of the last rehearsals I had before tech week I wrote in my journal on March 27th, “Do you want to witness me. What I am trying to do is show myself. That is terrifying! But why? I have a lot to offer and I now know that it is valuable so why do I not act like it. Each night and time I do this I have to know the importance of being honest. We are deconstructing here. Breaking down the old can also be a celebration. Going all the way to the roots. What makes me feel...

Head → Prefrontal Cortex removed

Solar Plexus → Soul

Shoulders → Tension

Inner Feet → Roots

Fingers → Delicate

Tummy → Insecurity

Hips → Pain and Ego

Balance → Vulnerability

Inner Organs → Anxiety, frustration, fear

Stillness → Clear, Okay with who I am

Control Chaos → Reality

Essentially this solo is a big body scan and if I communicate knowing that all of this has this loaded meaning to me. How shall that go. That is honest. At the end of the day everyone is just concerned with themselves.”

At this point in rehearsal, I started to get extremely frustrated because I could not find the feeling and satisfaction. Eventually, I realized I was not using all this frustration as fuel. I wrote, “The second I admit and step into how hard it is and how much I do not want to do it is the second I remember why I am sharing. Of course I do not want to do it, of course I am just reflecting on how the process has been great and I do not need the stage. How cowardly is that? Can I be brave and say all of this even if it is not pretty? Everyone relates. This is how I will enter the new world. With bravery.”

I continued rehearsal and kept pushing myself. It was challenging. It was not a high moment. I struggled with the inner fight and fear that I was trying to move on from. I wrote about how badly I did not want to get on the stage out of fear. I thought I was crazy for improvising, and I was questioning if that was the easy way out. As with life, a bad day just means a good day is coming. That next Sunday, I had rehearsal on the stage by myself before tech week started.

I thought that being alone in the studio was one of my favorite things, but then I had rehearsal on the stage by myself with no audience and that moved up on my charts of favorite things to do. I spent so much time in the theatre that night I could not even say how long. I danced and danced and danced. I probably did my solo at least ten different times. It was so fun and freeing. I explored the stage. I started in a new spot every time. I tried exiting the stage

during the piece. I tried new movements. I have never been alone in a theatre like that before and it was really special. After I was done dancing, I sat on the stage and journaled and researched.

I wrote on March 31st, “You know when you are in flow but sometimes the thing that puts you in flow is something intense or challenging but when you come out of flow you experience joy. A sense of wow and purity. That is what this solo is for me. You breakdown so you can resemble yourself in a better way. So you can have a deeper understanding. Things are under construction so it can be a better version of themselves/itself. Buildings, people. Nothing to remember if there is no sharing. Sharing=memories. Pieces of you. Pieces of me. Pieces of us.”

I never questioned the title of the piece but I never fully understood why I chose it. That night I researched the song and the meaning while sitting on the stage Here is my research about the meaning of the song:

“Sur le fil = on the wire, on the thread, on the string, on the edge (found on google translate). I found a song with the same title that had lyrics that are relatable. “It’s hard but you know it’s worth the fight cause you know you’ve got the truth on your side.’ ‘When the accusations fly, hold tight. Do not be afraid of what they will say who cares what cowards think, anyway they will understand one day.’ ‘On the edge, everything is quiet and calm. On the edge everything is easy and fine. On the edge we calm down.’ ‘Just in time, in the nick of time.’ ‘Walking on a tightrope and the idea of keeping one’s balance lest one should fall.’” (found on <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/sur-le-fil-tightrope.html>)

I left the rehearsal feeling excited and full of meaning. I had an important conversation with my dear friend Vivian when I got home that night. She told me how before her recent vocal

show she would spend at least 30 minutes everyday in the studios rehearsing. It was not always super pleasant but she put in the work. That allowed her to be fully prepared when it came to show time. This helped me trust myself more. I was putting in countless hours to this solo. There was no way I was going to get on the stage and not do what I had been doing for the past couple years. From this, I learned how valuable practicing and rehearsing for a performance is. All of the work matters and leads up to the big show. Put in the work to get the outcome desired. I finally felt ready for the stage.

As I approached tech week, I started reflecting on how everything I had been learning and experiencing became part of my solo. Outside of rehearsals, I had been learning a lot about myself and well-being. The solo had been changing as I had been changing throughout the semester. It became a solo about who I was. Every dance teacher I had this past year taught me one core concept: be yourself. It was about being yourself and bringing yourself to the dance. Tyce Diorio, Liana Blackburn, Jersey Michelle, and many other people preached about how important this was. Fully embracing myself would make me stand out. I heard this so many times, and eventually I started believing it. I went back to Hubbard Street for the Spring Intensive and every single one of the company members I took from always mentioned how bringing yourself to the dance is what is important. The point of view I have, the voice inside of me, my opinions, thoughts, experiences, perspectives, that is what sharing dance was about. It became about sharing myself. John Todd has been a huge influencer on this as well. He has always valued how vital it is to have a voice. He wants me to be seen and be heard. He has changed my life in many ways, but one conversation sticks out.

I was discussing with John how hard I try and how badly I want to improve. He responded by telling me how I beat myself up instead of loving myself during the process. I did not realize the lack of compassion I had towards myself. Once this was addressed, I started seeing how right he was. He also taught me that all I have is my life, so that is what I must pull from as an artist. I learned that nobody is in charge of whether or not I get to give myself permission to be me. The lessons I learned from John over the past two years of training with him gave me the courage to share and value my work.

At the same time I was creating this solo, I was also on the journey towards self-love and self-compassion. These two ideas are one in the same. For my psychology degree, I am taking positive psychology as my capstone. This class has also impacted my process. Many of the concepts are applicable to dance. In class we discussed growth mindset, compassion, flow, well-being, curiosity, and other concepts that directly related to this whole process. Having this class at the same time as creating this work helped me find a deeper meaning.

Through all of these lessons and the synchronicity of everything I was learning, the solo became about sharing myself. At the beginning of the process, I was frustrated and struggling, so that was what I shared. The frustration started to shift toward honesty and openness. Everything was enhancing my life and the solo was no longer separate. My sister sent me a quote the day of opening night that really grasps this idea. "The dance goes from realizing that you're separate (which is the awakening) to then trying to find your way back into the totality of which you are not only a part, but which you are." -Ram Dass. I meditated on this quote the entire show week.

If I listed every moment of my time at LMU that led up to the solo I performed, I would write hundreds of pages. It is worth noting some moments that stand out. Roz performed a solo

during faculty showing one year. I still remember it so clearly. She just walked across the stage with such strong intention and commitment. It brought me to tears. It was so simple but so moving. The power that this brought was captivating and something I wanted to do. The stillness in my piece was somewhat inspired by this. In Stephanie's Modern Five class, we always work on having a grounded standing leg. It reminds me of being a strong tree. Every night of the show, I would push myself to balance on one leg. I would always think about this concept and it helped. All of my technique classes have influenced the way I move. Ballet has allowed me to find my foundation enough that I can deconstruct when I choose. Modern classes have assisted me in finding different qualities of movement. Musical Theatre and Jazz classes have helped me find worth in my voice. Discussion-based classes have made me realize how badly dance needs to be shared right now. Support systems and relationships have encouraged me to do this solo in the first place. Conversations with David about music have shifted the way I think about timing and contrast with music. Philosophy and psychology classes have allowed me to think critically and deeply. Pilates and kinesiology helped me find autonomy over my body. Everything has influenced me. Not one part of my college experience is left out in this solo. It has all made me the person I am today. This solo is about being honest as who I am as a person which is directly connected to who I am as a dancer. All of this led to the point where I actually desired to be seen and heard.

Section 3

The time had come to finally share my piece. Every time I was on stage during tech week or show week I created a final product. Each product was different because every night I went into the theatre feeling differently. I was very nervous for tech. I had an idea that I was going to

start at a new point of the stage every night. This automatically shifted how the rest of the performance would go. The first night of tech I could feel my nerves affecting the way I was dancing. The biggest thing that threw me off was all of the lights. I could barely see! Regardless of this, the spontaneity of the piece excited me.

I wrote in my journal on April 3rd, “Ok so I loved being on stage I could barely see anyone and I know it is my moment. I remember being like wow! And the nerves at the beginning, there was no such thing as a standing leg! None! This is why training is so important. But after I did not feel that good partially because I was falling all over the stage. I just need to use and power through it and then find the moments of space. I was not commanding the space when I was actually moving. I need to take up MORE SPACE and travel and the power will come from that. More decisive and intentional. This is me. So I want to show that.”

On the Friday of tech week, I had a situation in my life that had left me feeling angry and carried over into my dancing. I had not felt this way with this solo yet. I embraced it. The music I warmed up to was different than music I would normally choose when rehearsing this solo. My plans for the solo that night were absolutely none! No part of me knew what I was going to do on the stage. I was insanely present. My mind had not been that clear in a long time. As a result, I felt like I took a lot of chances on the stage and honored how I was feeling. I remember getting off the stage and thinking “I will never do that again!” because it was so in the moment and decisive. I really listened to myself and I felt great knowing that.

I wrote on April 5th, “I was so angry and I knew it was going to be different than any other nights. I went with absolutely no expectations or plans and it felt so amazing and honest. I felt great about it. I would like to have more energy in my hands.”

The Monday of tech week was another good experience. I felt so present. The Tuesday before opening night was a big night for me. I had situations in life happen that were insanely synchronistic and powerful. A situation where my voice was not in my hands had happened and a situation presented itself where I had to speak up for myself. I had never done that the way I did that day. After that, I received good news regarding future plans. It was a weird moment of me discovering how powerful life can be when I honor my voice. I could not wait to share that night. I used all of my experiences from that day and put them into the solo. There was more stillness and clarity in my movement. I left feeling great.

The night was finally here! Opening night! I was so excited to share, and I was full of joy. I was not sure how I was going to get on the stage with a serious face because I was so happy. I could barely focus the entire day. I was nervous but I barely noticed because I just wanted to dance. Because the piece is structured improvisation, I never really knew what I did, I only knew how it made me feel. I was very present the whole piece. Finally performing for an audience was the most rewarding feeling ever. The support that I had at the show made me feel like honey. I have never had people make me feel so loved and valued. On Thursday, I was exhausted. I had six hours of dance earlier and my body was fatigued. I could barely warm up. Although I felt differently at the start, the feeling during the piece was the same. My movement empowered me. The stage made me feel raw. I moved from a place of honesty, and I navigated what I would do next. I had moments of complete flow. Friday I was so sore! Again, the feeling before the show was different, but during and after the piece, I felt the same. I could not repeat what I did because every decision I made was in the moment. Saturday, I did not feel good going into the show. I look back now and know it was because I had so many emotions that I was

bottling up (last night performing at LMU) and when I do that I sometimes feel sick. I walked on stage and actually thought I was going to throw up. I was imagining what would happen if I actually did. I knew it was going to be my last time performing at LMU. The thought of that overwhelmed me. The only way I could deal with it was by dancing. So I did. I used every bit of emotion that night to drive my movement. It felt a little different than the other nights. I let myself feel the way I was feeling. Once the curtain closed, my eyes filled with tears. The solo that meant so much to me, the stage that meant so much to me, all of this was ending. I felt like I did give a part of myself each night.

The amount that I learned about myself, dance, and life from this process is unmeasurable. The main take away that I observed from this experience is that everyday I went to perform the solo I felt different. Not one time was my body and mind the same. Some days I was angry, some performances I was full of joy, others days my body hurt and vice versa. However, I warmed up similarly and paid attention to what my needs were. Regardless of what I felt before hand, the stage brought me back to the same feelings. Every time I was on stage, I got lost in the moment. Nothing took me out of the present moment. I gave it everything I had. Like I discussed earlier, my body probably started remembering and picking up movements without me consciously knowing. The solo felt new every night even when I repeated certain movements and patterns. The improvisation was different and created a different solo but I barely noticed because every performance was coming from the same place and intention. I never once felt a sense of judgement towards myself. I loved doing the solo with this freedom because it allowed me to adjust in the moment. If I was going to do a developé but felt wobbly, I would think quick and decide how I was going to work through it. I also wanted the audience to experience this.

Seeing a dancer problem solve is something I have been interested in. Doing this on stage was also exhilarating. I had to let go of the idea of being perfect and predictable and embrace that I did not know what would exactly come out physically or emotionally. As opposed to reaching for perfection, I was aiming at honesty; therefore as long as I was true to this, I was not mad at the performance. I can say I successfully succeeded at this. Every night I got off stage and I would giggle to myself saying, “Well that was honest!”

The results of the solo were extremely rewarding. I felt amazing on and off the stage the entire time. It went better than I ever could have imagined. I feel nothing but joy and gratitude toward the final show. I felt an abundance of compassion, love, and courage towards myself and others that I have never felt before. This solo taught me how to live life. I trusted myself to do what was best. I learned that the unknown does not need to be scary but a chance to experience something new. Instead of looking at mistakes as failure and something to be upset about, I found that there does not need to be such a thing as a mistake. My idea of perfection has been dissolved. Normally, I would hate feedback. Going out and seeing the audience after a show is my least favorite thing. Not this time! The first night I had more people come to see me perform than in my whole life combined. I could not help but feel overwhelmed with love and support. Every night, I felt this from people. My friends, teachers, family, classmates, all received this solo with open arms. The feedback that I received reaffirmed that I achieved what I had dreamed of. Many people thanked me for sharing something so special; others told me how vulnerable and strong the piece was. This meant everything to me. I wanted to give the audience a part of me. I was hoping that by me sharing this others would feel that they can express themselves and open up to others. This was me in my purest form, and I have finally accepted myself. This solo

did more for me than I could ever imagine. My life is changed for the better. The only thing that does not feel fulfilling is that I do not think it is over. I want to take this work other places.

Section 4:

The next steps are just as important. I have learned so much from my thesis, and I know that what I learned has changed my views on the world and dance. It will continue to develop as time goes on. As I mentioned, when I finished the concert, I did not feel like I was done with this piece. I would love to perform this solo at festivals or other showings. I found that this creative process could go on forever. I see myself in the story that Teresa told me of a woman who made a hundred different versions of a solo because she never wanted to stop working on it. Having a constant practice and project for myself will be a healthy way to keep me centered when I take on the professional world. As I am changing and growing, this process will look different. I see myself continuing to create work on myself and possibly expanding it to larger groups. What I mainly see for my future is that I approach everything I do with the lessons this solo taught me. Every piece I learn and class I take can come from this place of honesty and compassion. This lesson I learned opened up a whole new world for me not only in dance, but life as well. Now that I am not dealing with as much frustration and angst that I have felt my entire dance career, I see myself advancing at a much quicker pace. I also see myself doing a lot more choreography and projects since there will not be as much time and energy spent on the negative.

It is hard to know what life will look in the future because I am where I am today due to the pleasant surprises in life. I believe in visualizing my future self and setting goals; however, I know that forecasting the future is difficult. I have grown an intense amount since my time at LMU, and if you showed me my freshmen year self, I would not have believed it. That being

said, I hope to continue improving and learning. Dance will always be my focus. What that exactly looks like I do not know. Performing, choreographing, teaching, traveling, and connecting with others through dance will be in my future. This thesis has taught me to trust myself and deeply invest in the process. The education I received at LMU along with the experiences that I have had will help me flourish in the professional world. I am forever grateful for this thesis and these past four years. It has been more fulfilling and joyful than I could have ever dreamed of and I look forward to the future.

Additional Quotes and Journal Entries

November 10th

“The moments of complete indulgence in dance and then humanizing it and remembering we are humans. A crazy time right now - how can we create something beautiful in a world so scary, am I supposed to? Or is being human not as beautiful as I thought? Is being a dancer as beautiful as I thought? These times are all the more reasons to dance. What does it mean to go in and out of these moments of hope and fear? They are so contrasting in feelings and in the way they look.”

“The one thing that you have that nobody else has is you. Your voice, your mind, your story, your vision. So write and draw and build and play and dance and live only as you can.” -Neil Gaiman

“You can’t get much done if you only work on the days that feel good.” - Jerry West

“Sharing the deepest parts of yourself, the parts of you that are ugly is what makes you special” - Liana Blackburn

“Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood.” - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Psalms 35:8

“Let destruction come upon him when he does not know it! And let the net that he hid ensnare him; let him fall into it—to his destruction!”

(All quotes can be found at <https://www.brainyquote.com/>)

Videos of Solo:

<https://lmu.app.box.com/file/442945088151>

<https://lmu.app.box.com/s/0n0gigwcy8fn6g0qzx0m9sspm4i55lit>

Photos of Solo:





